



FACT SHEET

Module 17

Anger Management

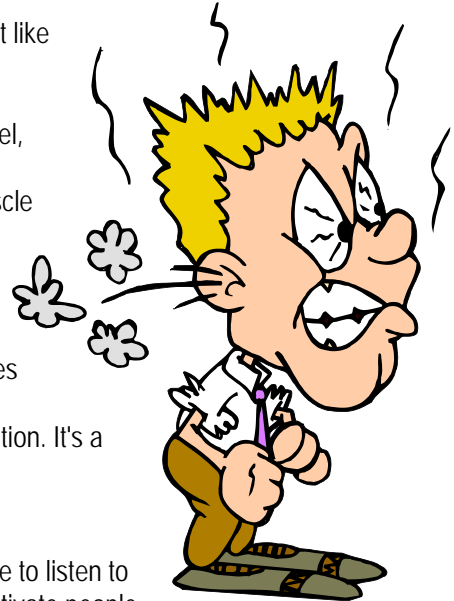
What is anger?

Anger is a feeling of displeasure or hostility. It's a normal, healthy emotion, just like any other feeling you have.

Anger has several components:

- **Psychological.** This is the emotional component of anger, how you feel, such as sadness, disappointment or frustration.
- **Physiological.** This is how your body responds to anger, such as muscle tension or an increase in heart rate and blood pressure as your body releases adrenaline—the fight-or-flight hormone.
- **Cognitive.** This is what you think as you experience anger, such as acknowledging that it's OK to be frustrated, or, on the other end, thinking that the world is out to get you or that your spouse "never" does what you ask.

In essence, anger is a warning bell that tells you something is wrong in a situation. It's a natural response to perceived threats.



So it's not "bad" to feel angry?

No, being angry isn't a bad or negative thing. Being angry can motivate people to listen to your concerns. It can prevent others from walking all over you. And it can motivate people to change larger societal issues. It's how you handle your anger that can be a problem.

Why, then, do some people think that being angry is unacceptable?

Some people are uncomfortable with the expression of anger. A lot of it depends on their own personal experiences with anger. For instance, if they were in abusive situations or if they grew up in a household where anger was used to control their family, any sign of anger can make them anxious. They can feel intimidated by anger, even if it's expressed in an appropriate manner. They may think "nice" people don't get angry.

What causes people to become angry?

There's usually an activating event—something in particular that sets you off, such as a disagreement at work, being stuck in traffic or not being able to get through to an actual person on the telephone. Some people may be angry about their own personal circumstances, such as financial problems. Most people don't just walk around feeling mad all the time, though, unless it was a learned behavior. People aren't born angry.

It's how people handle their anger that's important. What are the ways of handling anger, and what's the healthiest way?

There are two basic ways to handle anger:

- **Expression.** This is conveying your anger. Expression occurs along a continuum, from having a reasonable, rational discussion to erupting into out-of-control violence. It's the difference between talking to someone or picking up a baseball bat and hitting them.
- **Suppression.** This is trying to hold in or ignore your anger. You may think you shouldn't be angry or that you'll lose control if you let yourself feel any anger. The danger in this passive approach is that you may not protect yourself when the need arises. On the other hand, you may become passive-aggressive, where you don't express your anger assertively or directly but scheme to retaliate because you haven't learned how to express anger constructively. Trying to suppress your anger can lead to such health problems as headaches, stress, depression or high blood pressure.

Expressing yourself in an assertive—not an aggressive—manner is the healthiest approach to handling anger. You state your concerns and needs clearly and directly, without hurting others or trying to exert power over them.

Can anger harm your health?

There is evidence that shows inappropriately expressing anger can be harmful. Whether you're overly passive and keep your anger pent up, whether you're prone to violent outbursts or whether you're quietly seething with rage, you may have headaches, sleep difficulties, high blood pressure or digestive problems. There's even some evidence that stress and hostility related to anger can lead to heart attacks. That's another reason it's important to learn how to express anger constructively and appropriately—it's good for your health.

It seems as if so many people are on edge these days, ready to explode or actually launching into violent rages, like at sporting events. Is society becoming angrier?

Many people today are faced with multiple stressors—bills, drugs, peer pressure, racial conflicts, health care issues, war. There's a lot of stress in society in general. There are so many things to feel threatened about, and some people respond in a negative way. Or maybe they're just not satisfied with life; they're not content. And they haven't learned how to handle their anger constructively.

What can you do if you're confronted by someone whose anger is out of control?

Usually the most rational thing to do, if possible, is to just walk away. If you stay, you risk it escalating into violence. It's important to take reasonable precautions to protect yourself if leaving the situation is difficult or impossible, and to not engage the other person in a manner that's likely to provoke an escalation in their angry behavior.

That's not to say you should never confront someone. If someone is doing something you don't want them to do, and you confront them about it, you now have a conflict. You have to know how you're going to handle that conflict, though. Size up the person you're confronting, and be ready to protect yourself, especially if it's a stranger.

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